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Getting Extreme Poverty Narrated: Methodological Challenges of Interviewing Older Persons

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Abstract

Interviewing different groups involves different challenges and opportunities. Older persons living in extreme poverty are among those who warrant special methodological considerations. Building on the experiences of life-history interviews with extreme poor older persons in Bangladesh, this article contributes with a methodological reflection on the interview process from the start to the end. The article highlights the key practical, emotional, and ethical concerns that impact the interview process. Adopting an activist approach, it asserts that offering additional power and (or) agency to poor and vulnerable participants yields more benefit to research. The article challenges the traditional consent-seeking process as it remains short of protecting the participants fully. Period of silence appears to be crucial in interviews for which a researcher should devise schemes on how to manage and analyze silence as a non-textual interview content. The paper stresses on the need to frame plans and protocols for the researchers themselves as they can be exposed to mental, physical, or social harm. It recommends reformulation of the idea of accountability toward the research participants in relation to incentivisation, dissemination and reporting back to the community. Understanding all such nuances and careful dealing of micro-ethical aspects are crucial to succeed in an interview. The article can be particularly beneficial for early-stage researchers who conduct interviews with people living in extreme poverty, as it makes them more aware and prepared to deal with the possible challenges inherent in different stages of the interview process.

Keywords

qualitative research, research ethics, interviews, extreme poverty, older persons, Bangladesh

Introduction

Demographic projections have confirmed that more older persons are expected to live in developing countries (Kohli et al., 2020; Lloyd-Sherlock, 2000; Shetty, 2012). This exposes them to life in conditions of extreme poverty, marginalization, and vulnerability in absence or lack of proper policy response and erosion in the traditional forms of support structure. It is essential to acquire a deep understanding of their lived experiences in order to deal with these criticalities. Among the methods available, qualitative research (often through interviews) can offer a great deal of insight on ageing issues and increase the understanding of the ageing process, thus providing the opportunity to reconstruct what old age means in contemporary society (Lowton, 2012).

There is insufficient research on older persons living in conditions of poverty in developing countries. Hence, little is known about what it means to age in extreme poverty. At the same time, the methodological challenges involved in interviewing the older extreme poor have not been documented much. Sources sharing experiences of face-to-face interviews with older persons are very few in number (Tarzia et al., 2013). Therefore, capturing interview experiences with older persons can make significant contributions toward the methodological processes of interview-based research.

Conducting interviews is not free of challenges. Interviewing a vulnerable group (e.g., older persons) intensifies these challenges further. The intensity of such challenges depends on countless factors, as it often brings numerous practical, emotional, and ethical concerns. Success of an interview depends on the effective management and handling of situations pertaining to each aspect of the process, rather than

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improving any one of them. For instance, building strong relationships or meticulously dealing with ethical concerns alone cannot guarantee a successful interview. So, the experience of the entire interview process may be more helpful to researchers (and even more so to novice and/or early-stage researchers) than getting a snapshot of the ideas of each of the components. Understanding the entire interview experience can help grasp the nuances underlying a successful interview. As Brayda and Boyce (2014) highlighted, "... it can be difficult to translate interviewing theory into practice ... The literature about qualitative research often provides how-to suggestion lists, but it does not as often give full examples of real-life surprises from the experiences of interviewers, demonstrating roadblocks and how to get around them" (p. 319). They stressed that "novice researchers, particularly doctoral candidates, can benefit greatly from hearing full experiences from today's modern field, rather than reading only literature with how-to lists" (p. 332).

In January 2020, I completed my PhD fieldwork interviewing older persons living in extreme poverty in Bangladesh. I became gradually entangled in many questions and concerns that kept me occupied for a long time. Some of those were: How does one handle the situation in an ethically sound manner when the interview becomes too much emotional? What forms of solidarity or empathy are considered appropriate? How can one ensure that informed consent is really informed and deliberate? Can post-interview consequences that the participants may be exposed to be predicted accurately? In a predetermined context not to offer any financial assistance, gift, or incentives, is it morally sound to leave a starving participant without addressing the situation at all? How does the research process protect researchers who are exposed to distress and/or psychological trauma?

With this context in mind, this article engages in a narrative reflection of the experiences that cropped up during interviewing extreme poor older persons in Bangladesh. After a brief review of the literature and presentation of the field context, the findings will be discussed under several headings and subheadings, as they emerged during the analysis. Conclusions will be drawn based on the critical lessons learned from the findings. The article will be especially beneficial to novice, emerging, and/or early career researchers who rely on interviews to collect data. It may also be insightful for those who are concerned with research on ageing and poverty in developing societies.

Literature Review

Interviews are conducted frequently for research purposes. For many researchers, fieldwork and interviews are synonymous with gathering qualitative data or conducting qualitative research, and rests "on a feeling of wanting to see the concrete situation and informants in person" (Glaser & Strauss, 2017, p. 162). Qualitative researchers (often using interviews) aim to understand how people experience, perceive, and make sense of their lives (Kornbluh, 2015). Consequently, interviews

require the researcher to account for the unique social dynamics and norms of a particular society as they influence the interview process and interactions with participants (Turnbull, 2019). During this process researchers experience difficulties, challenges, experiences, and emotions during fieldwork which should be taken into account and reflected upon by researchers (Thummapol et al., 2019).

Hiller and DiLuzio (2004) propose three different perspectives to understand interviews: traditional, constructivist, and activist. The *traditional perspective* emphasizes on the role of the researcher and encourages rapport- and trust-building efforts to succeed in an interview. The *constructivist perspective* views participants more as meaning-making agents than as repository of answers. In the *activist perspective*, the interview process centers the participants' voice, particularly the voices of those who are marginalized, oppressed, or exposed to harm (p. 4). The crucial factor in each perspective is the power relation and (or) agency within which the researcher and the participant interact. In this interlay of power, both an experienced and a novice researcher (despite holding considerable power) may feel inferior to the participant and experience difficulties in arriving at a mutual understanding or a co-constructed meaning (Jacobsson & Åkerström, 2013). Another approach, known as postmodern interviewing, privileges the participants' agency by blurring the boundaries between the roles of the interviewer and participant (Borer & Fontana, 2012). Even so, interview as a tool, to some extent, tend to side-line the participant as a passive actor. However, what exactly may happen in an interview or during fieldwork and how the power relations are shaped can never be predicted correctly.

Qualitative research requires comparatively more "subtle, sustained and humanistic consideration" in handling ethical concerns (Iphofen, 2011). While dealing with these concerns during an interview, there is never a fixed scale or parameter to measure how the issues have been handled. For example, how do we validate or ensure that consent is voluntary? Simultaneously, we may raise the question of who gets to validate whether issues have been resolved, in situ on field, maintaining appropriate ethical mandates. By the time we can validate or judge our actions, we may have left the field, and damage, if any, may not be reversed. This complexity is well known in qualitative research (Riese, 2019). Thus, what is appropriate and what is not, is not always clear, although we try to learn and adapt from pilot interviews (Ritchie, 2009).

Emotional aspects that emerge during the research process have not been adequately addressed in the literature on methods (Thummapol et al., 2019). A certain degree of empathy is always necessary when things get emotional in an interview (Tarzia et al., 2013). Some studies have dealt with the emotional challenges experienced by participants and how one can handle them. However, how a researcher may be emotionally challenged while conducting in-depth interviews remains "surprisingly unspoken" (Sollund, 2008, p. 181). This is also known as the "emotional labor" of researchers. Emotional management is also viewed as certain type of emotional labor

(Bergman & Wettergren, 2015). Ramsay (1996) argues that failure to manage emotional labor may distort relationship which may be too costly to pay as well. When a participant becomes emotional, the interviewer steps in to handle the situation. However, when the roles are reversed, there is no guidance on how to manage the situation.

Interviewing as a technique does not always produce similar experiences. A particularly vulnerable social group, such as older persons, demands particular ethical and methodological contemplations (Russel, 1999). Even age differences can be influential. Lundgren (2013) finds that the age difference between the researcher and the (older) participants played a crucial role, influencing the interview situation and the kind of material that was produced.

Rapport or relationship-building is one of the most crucial steps in an interview, but it neither necessarily guarantees success, nor automatically balances the power during the interview process. A traditional one-off interview, in this sense, is perceived as both inadequate as a method of data collection and as unsuitable to the interests of the participants (Russel, 1999). This also implies that a researcher should consider how the participants like or dislike or make an effort to frame the interview. So what the participant wants us to listen to, deserves equal attention.

Both seasoned and novice researchers face unfamiliar situations and ethical dilemmas in the field, which induces trepidation (Blee & Currier, 2011). No matter how prepared we are before moving into the field, the interview encounter may take an unexpected turn. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) coined the phrase "ethics in practice" which they appertained with the notion of *microethics* and argued that procedural ethics are insufficient to deal with many ethically important challenges during interviews. While we usually have guidelines and intervention framework for broader ethical issues normally agreed through Institutional Review Board (IRB) to safeguard research participants (Kubanyiova, 2008), for unanticipated and micro ethical aspects we are often left without guidance. This is where we need further methodological concentration and debate based on real-life experiences of interviewing people in a different setting.

Research Context

I conducted 37 life-history interviews across villages of five sub-districts of Bangladesh: Gangachara (11 interviews), Haragach (two interviews), Golachipa (12 interviews), Itna (nine interviews), and Mithamain (three interviews). Each area has distinct geographical features. For example, Gangachara and Haragach were flood and *monga* (seasonal food insecurity) prone areas, Golachipa was a cyclone- and disaster-prone area near the coastal belt, and Itna and Mithamain are *haor* (wetlands that remain submerged for about half the year) areas. An extreme poverty graduation programme led by a Bangladeshi organization known as Palli Karma Sahayak Foundation (PKSF)[1] was planned to start in those poverty pockets but no intervention initiated. PKSF's partner organizations supplied

me a provisional list of households headed by older persons which I used to further validate and identify the participants for my study. Average recorded duration of each interview was 43 minutes. However, actual time spent on the interview spot was more than the recorded duration. More reflections on this are made in the findings section. Out of 37 participants, 17 were female, and 20 were male, with an average age of 71 years. Average monthly household income was reported around 1,200 Bangladeshi Taka (USD 14.30/month).

In qualitative research, *saturation* is commonly used to decide on the sample size. However, *saturation* as a term and as a process is rather tricky to get through. As Bowen (2008) states, the concept of *saturation* remains nebulous as it is not properly explained in a research context, and the process lacks systematization. If *saturation* is understood as the point at which we derive nothing new from the new recruitment of participants, then it is also hard to measure until we pass that point and judge it in hindsight. I argue that research that aims to highlight the lived experiences of the older extreme poor does not necessarily need to arrive at a saturation point. Instead, the quality of the interviews matters. Hence, the decision to cease recruiting new participants was based on whether I managed to acquire a rich set of interviews, known as "information-rich cases" (Bowen, 2008), which I informally classified as *gold standard interviews* for my own use. The main indicator to measure this standard was the rigor and depth of the stories I gathered, indicating the possibility to connect with strong theoretical insights.

Relying on an interview guideline, I conducted five pilot interviews in the semi-urban and rural areas of Chittagong district 2 weeks before the original fieldwork. The guidelines comprised guided questions and points of interest in several thematic areas that I aimed to explore. It was not a pleasant experience to try to structure the interviews using such guidelines, as it seemed to shrink the space of expression for the participants. It also interrupted the flow, creating a missing link among the stories narrated. Jones (1998) finds it useful not to disturb the flow of the story being narrated particularly when interviews are emotionally painful in nature. Rather, he kept waiting, and things came up quite spontaneously (p. 51). Goodson and Gill (2011) encourage minimal interrogation when there is flow during a life-history interview. Offering participants full control to sequence their life stories in their own way, they maintained a "vow of silence" when the interview flowed, unless it was absolutely strategically and cognitively necessary to interrupt (p. 39). This can also be considered as an attempt to aid participants with agency. While it cannot be denied that occasional interruption is necessary in an interview, a researcher should be aware of when and how to interrupt an interview conversation gracefully (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). From the pilot interviews, I learned that in life-history interviews with older persons, it is better to adopt a storytelling format and then cherry-pick points of interest and stretch them further. Human lives comprise many links in a chain of complex life events. By breaking the chain of stories or life events, we may risk missing many crucial aspects that may not be as

crucial for the researcher as it is for the participant. I found that when the research participants were adequately made aware of the research objective(s), they were better able to filter things that were important and not go on tangents. Fontana (2003, p. 163) recommends seeing participants as "rational beings" who understand "all possible choices presented to them and answer as comprehensively and truthfully as possible." In retrieving the life histories, I emphasized on recalling major life events that affected their ascent and descent in poverty. This step offered a rich set of stories and narratives of their lives.

I maintained a notebook throughout my fieldwork, not only to note down interview text, but also to have a written record of everything I noticed, felt, and observed. This diary was the primary data source for this article. I also reviewed all the audio-recorded interviews to reflect on key issues that emerged, which I may have missed noting down. All this accumulated information was then manually coded using a spreadsheet and then thematically grouped and analyzed further.

Findings

Findings are presented as follows using a narrative style under different headings according to the stages and aspects of the interviews: 1. Access; 2. Rapport Building and Conducting the Interviews; 3. Emotions and Ethical Issues; and 4. Ending and Exiting the Interviews. Many issues overlapped. However, they were placed under different headings based on the sequence in which they emerged during the interviews.

Access

Entry into the interview site does not necessarily guarantee access to the participants. My experiences in the field have revealed that access can have three different meanings in an interview context: accessing the community (where the participants live), accessing the participants (with physical presence), and accessing the inner selves of the participants (in which they are willing to reveal or unfold their stories spontaneously). It is not clear to what extent access and consent overlap with each other. Therefore, the differences between them are not always apparent (Miller & Bell, 2002). To some extent, access is necessary to obtain consent, and consent is necessary to obtain access.

Walking in the community is a great learning experience in itself and forms an integral part of the fieldwork. Such spaces, as Elwood and Martin (2000, p. 652) argue, "can offer a rich source of data about social geographies of the research situation and enable researchers to enrich their understanding of explanations offered by participants." I was constantly observed and followed around. People even noticed which direction I went, the households I entered, and time I spent there. Several people then came forward to talk to me of their own volition. These informal conversations were enriching, as the following two paragraphs show.

People in the community are the primary entry points or gatekeepers. I was frequently asked by the curious masses if was listing people for a potential future intervention. It was challenging to convince them that I was there to interview older persons and not to draw up such a list. Many of them continued to request to be on "the list." A few of them made unexpected entries during the interviews and tried to convey the idea that they were not in a better situation than the person I was interviewing. Ignoring them may have made them suspicious of me and may have impacted future relations with the people in the community and the people I interviewed. Instead, I politely reconfirmed the purpose of my visit. All these are part of accessing the community.

After a broad overview of the community and the older persons living in it, I identified study participants. I wanted to include participants from different backgrounds: single-married, male-female, living alone or living with or without children, widowed, divorced, and separated. Once decided on who I would interview, in many situations, I did not find the participant at home. Thus, I moved on to the next one. In some situations, I found the person busy doing something else (e.g., cooking, feeding the livestock or doing other household chores) and asked if I could come back later. In most cases, one or two people with whom I interacted, while taking a walk, led me to the participant I had identified and introduced me to them. This was very helpful in putting the participant at ease before I even began to talk, as it conveyed the idea that the person who had guided me to them certified my trustworthiness. So, accessing the participants physically can also be tricky,

I interviewed not more than two participants in a *para* (several *para* constitute a village) in order to increase participant diversity. However, I was not rigid about interviewing only the person I selected, as long as the participant was randomly identified and truly lived in extreme poverty. I learned that realities in the field may compel us to change our decisions and make harmless compromises in the study design. For instance, in one of the communities I visited, when I finished interviewing an older woman, I found a barefoot man in his seventies with torn winter clothes waiting outside. He had noticed me when I entered the village and followed thereafter. I was not sure what he had in mind, but for some reasons, he followed me for more than two kilometers. We greeted each other, and he confidently showed me his national identity card as proof of his age. Although I mentioned that I was talking to selected older persons for my study, he kept insisting that I should talk to him. His confidence drew my interest and I agreed to interview him. He then led me to his house. The interview was insightful.

It is crucial for a researcher to understand the community, its structure, and culture. How we attend and manage concerns, curiosities, and expectations of the interviewed and non-interviewed people can affect the outcomes of the interview itself. Some of the initial challenges at the interview site can be resolved or eased up with the intervention of people from the community. For example, I had a set criterion but still identifying the poorest and most vulnerable was a challenge for me, as most people in the region were poor to some degree. Informal discussions with the community eased this challenge. This kind

of discussion also enables the researcher's entry into and acceptance by the community. Prior planning and assumptions may conflict with the realities we encounter. Hence, we should not have a fixed approach to handle issues.

Rapport Building and Conducting the Interviews

Researchers care a great deal about building rapport or positive relationships with the participants. Establishing this in a single meeting (mostly of a short length) is always tricky (Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Tarzia et al., 2013). We do not often have the luxury to meet and interview each participant more than once. Brayda and Boyce (2014) argue that establishing rapport may be necessary, but it is better to avoid friendship, as it can bias data selection. Duncombe and Jessop (2012) raise concerns around building relations by faking friendship, stating thus: "[The interviewer] must seat themselves not too far away but not too near . . . They should keep eye contact, speak in a friendly tone . . . If this is 'friendship,' then it is a very detached form of it" (p. 111). However, my take is that relation can be short-lived which emerge out of a chemistry of trust, respect, positionality, flexibility, and sensitization. At the very beginning, the relationships remain nascent, but evolve and take shape as the discussions continue.

Informed consent is an ethical and legal requirement in research (Benitez et al., 2002). It ensures that participants understand the research process and have all the relevant details in order to make a free and full decision about their participation independently (Gordon, 2000). I originally had an informed consent form to read it out in native language and then to get sign or thumbprint on it. But asking the participants to sign or thumbprint the form backfired. In the first two cases, when requested to either sign or thumbprint the sheet, the first one hesitated and the second wanted to seek a suggestion from one of her (knowledgeable) neighbors. This had the potential to create major consequences afterwards. Most of the older persons were not formally educated, and there were rumors and incidents of cheating and scamming in the name of taking signatures and thumbprints. Thus, I immediately stopped the process and began recording verbal consent which they happily agreed.

While explaining the research process and their rights (e.g., the right to withdraw from the interview or to refuse to participate at any stage without an explanation), many reacted as though such rights had no meaning for them. Some of them even asked me not to read it out. For them, there was no question of refusing or feeling uncomfortable at all, as they considered it a honor to have someone visit them. However, this does not mean that a researcher is exempted from obtaining informed consent. At the end of this process, they felt valued, which was good for the interviews.

It is desirable to tape-record open-ended interviews, as a free-flowing discussion brings up many topics and some of them are unpredictable (Wenger, 2001). With explicit verbal consent, I audio-recorded all the interviews. However, I lost four of them because of technical problems and malfunctioning of the device. Once consent was obtained, I placed the device in a discrete location so that the participant was not distracted during the interview. All the participants understood the function and purpose of the device.

Researchers claim that power relations and positionality can be shaped by the location of an interview (Elwood & Martin, 2000). Participants were asked to decide on an interview spot where no one would wander in and out during the interview. Most of them decided to do it in their living rooms, except a few. For instance, a woman, a Hindu, was not willing to have the interview inside the living room because she had sculptures of the gods and goddesses she worshipped. I assumed she was concerned because I had traveled a long distance, and that I might bring impurity into her home. For an unknown reason, she immediately changed her mind and requested me to do it inside. Almost all participants were concerned about the seating arrangement. Making a comfortable seating arrangement for me seemed to be their paramount concern. I was usually offered a higher seat/place to sit on, and the participants sat on the floor. I reversed the seating arrangement every time, which they accepted as a gesture of politeness and respect.

The way the participants and I addressed each other played a crucial role in setting the interview environment. I negotiated this in the beginning in all cases. Unlike in the pilot, where the participants called me *sir*, during the actual interviews, I offered the participants to call me *Baau* (a local term used to refer to a son, nephew, or grandson) and I called them *chacha/chachi* (uncle/aunt) or *dada/dadi* (grandfather/grandmother). This helped the participants express themselves freely and eased the process to access the inner selves of the participants.

Although it was not in the original plan, at the request of some of the participants, I had to allow their spouses to participate in the interview. This made it seem as though it were not "his" or "her" story, but rather, "their" story, drawing on their lives together for years. This helped me gain more information. In terms of emotional management, the setup was also far more comfortable. Some older persons felt better when they had company. As Bjørnholt and Farstad (2014) in support of this kind of arrangement mention that "stories told in a real-life context with important others present can frequently provide a better picture of a relationship than individual stories about the relationship" (p. 17).

When pressed for details of particular life-events, the participants were hesitant to respond. This was not because they were not willing to share, but because they doubted whether their stories (at such level of detail) added any value. In such cases, I found it useful to explain how the story would contribute to the research and enable a better understanding of what it means to age in the conditions they lived in. Making a participant feel valued matters a lot but making them feel that their stories matter is equally crucial, two different aspects. Concentrating too much on taking notes may leave a participant feeling abandoned. In a few cases, when the participants saw that I was too focused on taking notes, they either slowed down or stopped talking altogether. I found it compelling to respond

to their stories by maintaining eye contact and nodding in a culturally appropriate manner. Similarly, Atkinson (1998) claimed,

> You can be very encouraging to the other person with nods and smiles. When the interviewee knows you have a similar awareness on some topic or experience, that will help him or her feel a solidarity with you that can naturally lead to revealing more to you than he or she might tell someone else. (p. 32)

It is complicated to define the exact point at which a relationship or friendship is established in the course of an interview. Establishing a good relationship brings a researcher closer to a successful interview. This relationship must be developed and nurtured throughout the interview process. Verbal recorded consent works better for the poor, vulnerable and informally educated participants. The rights we explained before obtaining consent may mean nothing to the older participants but this gave them a sense of honor. Addressing and being addressed with culturally appropriate language and nodding, while maintaining eye contact are all essential to developing and maintaining relationships. One crucial learning was to remain flexible to learn and adapt from field realities. It pays back positively.

Emotions and Ethical Issues

During the entire interview process, I have encountered several anticipated and unanticipated, micro and meso-concerns which are emotional and ethical in nature. Managing one's own emotions as a researcher is critical. During fieldwork, the living conditions and the stories of the older persons, left me feeling upset most of the time. It came to a point where I dreaded going for interviews. I witnessed almost all 37 participants crying while narrating their stories, which stressed me out and made me feel at a loss. Such outbursts of emotion did not result from the types of questions asked. For instance, it often started with the first question when I asked, "Do you remember your childhood days and days with your parents?" However, despite becoming emotional during the interviews, the participants later expressed that they felt happy and light after sharing their stories with me. As Wolgemuth et al. (2015) mention that for research participants, interviews may appear like an opportunity for self-reflection, self-appraisal, catharsis, being emphatically responded to, and being validated etc. However, it is important for a researcher to be able to regain control of the situation after (Orb et al., 2001). To manage the participants' emotions, I tried different strategies. For example, I changed topics for a while when one female participant began crying. I pointed to a picture hanging on the wall of a baby girl, asking who she was. The woman immediately wiped her tears and smilingly shared that the girl was her grandchild, who lived in Dhaka with her parents, and that she missed her so much.

There were moments during some of the interviews that I was not prepared to handle. Even now, I do not have a clue whether I dealt with them appropriately or not. For example,

I never found it annoying or uncomfortable when a number of the participants held my hand or caressed my hair as if they were blessing me. Would every researcher feel comfortable with this? If not, does it imply that the research process should also orient participants about research ethics to a basic degree? Being Bangladeshi, considering myself a sort of an insider, I am familiar with these things. In an intergenerational interview, where I am in my 30s and the participants in their 60s or older, such gestures make sense in the local culture. What if the roles were reversed? Can we show our solidarity with the participants during an emotional situation in a similar manner? Does the same dynamic operate toward a female participant from a male interviewer? In practice, I did express myself, but only when the participant took my hand first. There is a dilemma around whether a researcher should console a participant or express empathy toward them. If this is so, the researcher has to have a strategy to handle it. We should be aware that the act of showing solidarity or empathy may also backfire even if the participant may feel comfortable. As Thomson (2009) notes, her act of offering emotional support by touching the shoulder of a woman upset another female participant as the two women had a conflicting issue.

Incentivizing or paying research participants is still under debate in the literature. For some researchers, paying participants is a marker of ethically sound research while for some others, it can compromise the ethics of the study (Head, 2009). Although it was clarified before the interviews that no incentive would be offered, I still wonder, how I could leave the participants (who were literally starving) without responding to their situation. In contrast, if I had offered financial assistance to any of them out of my own pocket, how much would I have deviated from the ethical principles set for this study? Would it be considered as a positive deviation? None of the participants made such a request though. If a researcher has the responsibility to ensure justice and fairness, and do no harm, then, perhaps we are compromising on all those principles by simply bypassing the issue. I remember that a few people from the curious masses teased me saying, "You people come and leave; you come for your own sake—not at all for us." This is true, as most researchers never return to the community again. This experience is similar to what Höglund (2011) encounters in her research with a South African community where researchers were accused of collecting information that they needed and of leaving without giving the communities anything which made the people unwilling to participate in future research (cited in Blee & Currier, 2011). I got the feeling that people as a courtesy want researchers to be accountable to the community, as we derive our knowledge and data from them. I also realized that they had the appetite to see the results or the outcome of the research or at least the benefit of the time and effort they offered as participants. This signifies that we must rearticulate our understanding of ethics and accountability toward research participants.

I found some older persons living in abusive environments. It raises concerns, to what extent we get involved, especially where we do not have the luxury to go back and follow up.

Most participants who faced abuse expressed their experiences in a very low voice, which was hard for me to understand. I could not ask them to speak louder, as that would have resulted in harsh consequences for them. For example, one participant (70) showed me how her daughter-in-law had destroyed her only living room by repeatedly kicking the sidewalls. The woman continued to stay there, close to her son, at least so that he would perform the last rites upon her death. While we spoke, her daughter-in-law was around. I decided to stop the interview midway, but she firmly held my hand, made me stay, and listen to her stories. I felt I have a role here. As an effort, I shared my preliminary findings on elder abuse with PKSF, so that they could address it in their programme planning and offer appropriate interventions.

Periods of silence in interviews often carry a deeper meaning. Silence offers a nuanced understanding of how the research participants construct and shape their social worlds (Bondy, 2013). Silence has a disruptive impact on interviews, but can be constructive as well if we embrace it (Bengtsson & Fynbo, 2018). I found most of my older participants falling silent on and off. I had never imagined that this could be so significant. It frequently came with long and deep breaths as if they wanted to reflect, rearticulate, refresh their minds, and continue thereafter. These moments appeared as wordless invaluable content or materials to be analyzed. I have remained positive always in those moments. However, I felt the need to develop a strategy to analyze silence.

There is no fixed approach to addressing ethical and emotional aspects that arise during interviews. As Blee and Currier (2011) rightly point out, "Qualitative researchers make ethical missteps, not necessarily out of malice, but because of sincerity . . . but how they recover from these mistakes constitutes part of the ethical process" (p. 406). With extreme poor, marginalized, and vulnerable groups, we may often be challenged with many concerns as researchers. Many may need immediate intervention. It should be of equal importance for a researcher to try to listen to what is not being said (in the form of silences), as silence adds to the rigor of the interview content.

Ending and Exiting Interviews

From entry to exit, research is a social process of negotiation (Bondy, 2013). The exit experience for each interview offered a lot of valuable information which taught me that a researcher should have an exit plan. Participants may be affected in mild, moderate, or severe ways individually (emotionally, physically), and/or socially during interviews. A researcher's informal interactions with the community or handling curious neighbors can matter significantly. These things can have post-interview implications in the social lives of the participants to which the researchers often remain oblivious (Tisdale, 2004). For instance, extreme poor participants can be refused social support if their neighbors assume that they had received or were going to receive some kind of financial and/or material assistance for participating in the interview.

An interviewer routinely moves on to interview another participant, but the older person may feel abandoned or be left reflecting on their sad experiences (Wenger, 2001). This was true in my study. In the interviews where my participants and I had excellent conversations, the ending had a different ambience, most of which was not recorded, as I had already formally closed the interview and stopped recording. The conversation, however, continued until I bid farewell. Often the duration of this conversation was longer than the recorded interview. During this period, many other exciting stories were revealed, which I had to note down immediately.

Just because I had formally ended the interview, it did not mean that the conversation was over. Darlington and Scott (2020) recommend that one should "leave time for some day-to-day conversation at the end of the interview—some people will not want to engage at this level but for others, it will be an important part of the closure process" (p. 61). Some of the information revealed during this period made me feel challenged. For instance, after I finished one interview, the participant said that he was supposed to go begging that day but as it was already late, he canceled his plans. When I started the interview, this participant had confirmed that he had the time for the interview and nothing else to do that day. I was left feeling guilty, as no begging might mean no food for the family that day. This experience also highlighted that revisiting verbal consent is important. As Miller and Bell (2002) explain, "consent" should be ongoing and renegotiated throughout the interview and can change at any point. Extreme poor older persons, despite giving consent to an interview, may endure other consequences that must be carefully analyzed and considered. I learned that mere verbal consent does not necessarily mean a visa to conduct the interview. If it is not carefully managed, a researcher may generate a heavier burden on an already burdened group (Tisdale, 2004).

In most cases, I found that the older participants were not in a hurry to finish the interviews. An interviewer should be prepared to be generous with their time if participants are generous with theirs (Wenger, 2001). I realized that one of the best possible things I could do for my participants was to spend extra time with them. This enriched the interviews significantly. There was also resistance and expression of frustration from some participants. For example, people complained if we, the researchers, ever talk to their children to understand why they abandon their parent when they need them. A researcher does not have answers to everything the participants ask, but such questions should not be ignored. We usually tell the participants what the research is all about before taking their informed consent. My experience suggests that it is equally important to explain the participants what the research is not about and to lay out the limitations of the research as well.

Interviews can be traumatizing, frustrating, and highly distressing for researchers (Fontes, 2004). Therefore, research planning must focus on the safety and wellbeing of the researcher and the participants alike (Fontes, 2004). The stories and the living conditions of the older persons made me too much distressed and exhausted every day that I was scared to

go for interviews the next day. I had no clue how to handle this but I tried to reschedule my field plan adding few non-interview days in between before I moved to a new location. These additional days allowed me to settle down and reflect on the content collected. Surprisingly, this period of reflection made me further motivated and committed to represent their stories better. So, stresses can be the strength for researchers as well. As Jones (1998) notes:

> . . . feelings, perhaps particularly distressing feelings, can lead to us to the heart of social and political problems that need to be examined. It seems to me that if we are obtaining information from interviews that have been painful for participants to talk to us about, and have been painful for us to listen to, then we do have a duty to look hard at that material and perhaps do something constructive with it. If we are doing interviews that are distressing and then not doing anything with the material, then perhaps we should be questioning what we are doing. (p. 55)

Conclusion

Interviews are a staple in social-science research and help us learn about lives, feelings, and experiences (Gubrium et al., 2012). Research with vulnerable groups often presents unique and difficult challenges that need special care from the researcher during the interview (Liamputtong, 2007), starting from the planning stage. As Tisdale (2004) writes, "if a researcher knows that the potential participants have somehow been marginalized or compromised within society, the researcher is ethically (and legally) obligated to take precautions" (p. 25). An interview, as an artform, should not follow the same technique, tone, strategy, or sensitivity for all age cohorts and vulnerable groups. Despite intensive field planning and experiences gleaned from pilot interviews, I encountered several additional challenges during my fieldwork to be resolved immediately often without external aid. For the novice and early-stage researchers, with little experience of field research, this can be even more challenging and stressful. Therefore, they require an understanding of the nuances from real-life evidences.

One of the crucial ethical concerns in interview-based research is obtaining the consent of the participants. It has substantial implications throughout the interview. Experiences during my fieldwork supported Corrigan's (2003) claim that we need to broaden the debate on informed consent from its current scope. As experienced in this study, traditional consent seeking model runs short of offering enough protection to many participants. Consent should be revisited throughout the interviews, reminding the participants of their rights at regular intervals. Without this, consent-seeking process can turn into a "meaningless ritual" (Thorne, 1980 cited in Tisdale, 2004). This aspect also needs to be further studied.

There is never a fixed, prescribed solution to an ethical challenge that emerges during field research; there are no answers to some ethical issues within the ethical codes and research guidelines either (Orb et al., 2001). A solution identified in a particular context may prove inappropriate in another. As Iphofen (2011, p. 445) wrote:

> As times, methods, cultures and contexts change, the researcher has to actively address the novel situation they find themselves in, and most qualitative researchers know this occurs in the dynamic nature of the research process and invariably "during" the research engagement . . . . There are so many times that ethical compromises and judgement calls have to be taken in the field that the researcher cannot abrogate.

Based on the context and the type of participants, interview planning should include provision of basic or minimum required incentives or compensation as an obligation, specially to those who are the poorest and most vulnerable. We may need to compromise and attend to a judgement call as Iphofen (2011) argues. I interviewed older persons in remote areas who live in extreme poverty. Although there were enough reasons to justify not offering assistance, I still felt something could have been done. This research reconfirmed that researchers must have a sense of humility and a sense of flexibility based on the field conditions (Thomson, 2009). Crucially, the field experiences discussed in this article attest the need to reformulate understanding of ethics and accountability as a researcher toward participants.

Qualitative inquiry requires a sense of flexibility and openness (Thomson, 2009; Watt, 2007). Flexibility benefitted my study. For example, interviewing a random person who kept persuading me to interview him offered me a rich narrative. Allowing the spouse (at the request of the participant) to participate so that they can be interviewed together in a few cases eased the interview process without any noticeable deviation from the narratives I aimed to collect. The decision to switch from a guideline-dependent controlled interview to a more open one was also rewarding.

Silence is frequently neglected in research. Silence can also be so powerful and if interpreted correctly, it can produce something new rather than just (re)shaping the power structure between a researcher and a participant (Bengtsson & Fynbo, 2018). Interpreting only what is expressed will always leave an interview incomplete (Poirier & Ayres, 1997). Silence was crucial in my interviews, and revealed nothing less than what the uttered words did. Interviewing poor, vulnerable and older population may generate more episodes of silence than other groups while narrating their stories. To harness the most, researcher should have plan how to manage and analyze silence as a non-textual interview content.

While the power balance is one of the crucial concerns for a researcher to maintain, I found that offering more power and/or agency to the participants (particularly to vulnerable and marginalized groups) can be rewarding. Often researchers argue in favor of exercising their power to obtain targeted, structured responses. I followed an *activist approach* (Hiller & DiLuzio, 2004) instead and learned that if the interview objective and

scope are clarified well to those in extreme poverty (who are often deprived of power and agency), they can take great care to decide what to narrate and what not to. Experience suggests that intergenerational interviews can be successful, at least in poverty research. A significant age gap between the researcher and the participants was not a barrier in my study. Rather, this gap (where age-influenced power was leaned toward the participants) fostered a livelier discussion without making me feel that I earned less.

While planning a study, we discuss and consider several ethical measures that we can put in place in order to reduce any harm or negative impact on the participants. However, we do not care much about issues that can affect the researchers themselves. It has to be acknowledged that interview may leave a researcher with long-lasting emotional scars or wounds, after exposure to mental, physical, or social harm. Certain mechanisms should be in place to guide researchers on how to deal with emotional labor.

The article altogether brought a range of issues which are similar to the notion of *microethics* as argued by Guillemin and Gillam (2004) for which they suggested a researcher to be ethically reflexive to resolve them better. Such reflexivity allows the researcher to rely on personal judgement than formal rules or standard practices (Pollock, 2012). Ignoring minor ethical issues completely might result in harmful consequences (Kubanyiova, 2008). Therefore, the researcher has to be able to identify which ones are sensitive and require attention and subsequent intervention.

Researchers will keep facing unanticipated issues during interviews, and must act and make decisions by relying on their personal ethical convictions (Tisdale, 2004). Methodological reflections on the entire process of interviewing may help refurbish those ethical convictions and help the researcher do better each time. Field experience can prepare young novice researchers by making them aware and helping them deal with the challenges that come while interviewing people in conditions of extreme poverty in general and the older poor in particular.

Acknowledgments

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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Notes

1. Visit this link for details about PKSF and the programme—https://ppepp.org/

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